

Voices
from the
GapsAnchee
Min

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In order to comprehend China, or in fact anything, Katherine must understand that things are not made of separate parts put together, like machines. The Chinese mind doesn't ask how things were made, which to Katherine must sound odd. If the universe were "made", there would be someone who knows how it was made--who could explain how it was put together as a technician could explain, one word at a time, how to assemble a machine. But the universe simply grows, and the shortcomings of language, for one thing, exclude the possibility of ever explaining how it grows. Katherine must understand that the universe does not operate according to plan. Katherine is misguided by her western view. She should learn how to open herself to the unknown in order to gain knowledge.

— Katherine

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**Quick Facts**

- * Born in 1957
- * Chinese memoirist and novelist; currently lives in the United States

Biography

Anchee Min was born in 1957 in Shanghai, China, during the Cultural Revolution. She was the oldest of four children. Her mother was an elementary school teacher and her father was an instructor of industrial technical drawing at Shanghai Textile Institute. The six members of her family lived in a two-bedroom apartment in the south of the city. In 1967 they were forced to move to a smaller apartment because they were accused of being "bourgeois intellectuals."

This page was researched and submitted by: Carolyn Steeves on 12/16/02.



Anchee Min

Biography continued

By 1971, her parents had lost their jobs and taken labor jobs. Her father was sent to work at a printing shop as an assistant clerk and her mother was sent to work at a shoe factory as part of a government sponsored “reeducation program.” In her memoir, *Red Azalea*, Min reflects that her parents didn’t like their jobs, but they behaved correctly for their kids’ sake.

Soon after their move, Min was appointed leader of the Little Red Guard at her elementary school because she had good grades. She became a model to her classmates for following Maoism. She writes that the Red Guards showed her and her classmates how to destroy and how to worship. As leader of the Little Red Guard, Min was pressured into denouncing one of her teachers as a spy in the name of communism. She had memorized all of Madame Mao’s operas, the only music broadcasted over the radios, and she could quote Mao Zedong backwards and forwards. She later recalls that it took her 27 years to find out that her mom was a Christian, and her mother was good not to tell her, because she would have reported her mother as a counter-revolutionary to the Communist Party. She says that she was brainwashed.

At the age of seventeen Min joined millions of other city-dwelling teenagers to become a peasant and work in rural areas of China. This program, when translated into English, is called “educated youth go up to the mountains and down to the countryside.” This took place from 1967 to 1976; over 7 and 1/2 million city kids were sent to the countryside to work as peasants. This program was promoted by Chairman Mao as a way to educate youth and increase the country’s productivity. Min comments in her book that every family had to have a peasant worker or they were looked down upon. Joining the work force was more or less non-negotiable. Any family who didn’t have at least one peasant worker would be ridiculed by their neighbors as suspected counter-revolutionaries.

On April 14, 1974, Min boarded a truck that went to a farm near the shore of the East China Sea. The workers were treated as soldiers at war. They advanced across the fields in staircase shaped formation, they were ridiculed for straightening their backs, and their hands were stained brown from fungicide. Women continued to work even as they bled. During her time as a peasant, Min worked relentlessly in order to be accepted by her commanders. Before long, one of her commanders saw Min as a threat to her power and Min would have suffered greatly had she not been picked up by a government sponsored filmmaking troop.



Anchee Min

Biography continued

In 1976, Min moved back to Shanghai as one of 5 final candidates auditioning for the role of the main character Madame Mao (Jiang Ching) in a biographical film. Min was not selected because she was a good actress, but because she looked like a proletariat. In the same year, Chairman Mao died. Madame Mao was imprisoned and denounced as an evil seductress. The film was never made. Although Min never met Jiang Ching, she was punished none-the-less for her affiliation, made to work fourteen hour days as a set clerk at the film studio. During the eight years that she worked as a set clerk, Min had the opportunity to meet a few of Jiang Ching's friends and enemies. The information she obtained from them inspired Min to write a historical fiction of Jiang Ching's life, called *Becoming Madame Mao*. After eight years of working for the film studio, Min contracted tuberculosis. She needed to leave.

An actress friend of Min's, Joan Chen, helped her apply to school in the United States. She was accepted to the Chicago Institute of Arts in 1984, but she knew only enough English to get past the immigration officials. Once the Institute found out that she couldn't speak any English, they sent her to the University of Illinois for ESL. Writing about her experiences growing up were regular assignments for her English class. These assignments led to the publication of *Red Azalea*, her personal memoir. In an interview with Jana Siciliano from Bookreporter.com she comments that she didn't decide to become a writer. She never dared to dream. As a new immigrant, she was just writing to learn English so she could survive. Learning English was a painstaking experience.

In 1990, Min graduated from the Chicago Institute of Arts with a B.F.A. and M.F.A. in Fine Arts.

Red Azalea, published in 1994, was a *New York Times* bestseller in 1995 and has sold its rights in twenty countries. Hollywood bought the movie rights. More than simply her experiences, people are drawn to Min's writing style as well, passionate and intense, with a certain naivete. In an interview with Annie Wang, she says that her style reflects the way she remembers her life. None of Min's works have been published in Chinese, yet because of her international recognition, Min became famous in China overnight. People read reviews of her books, *Red Azalea* and *Katherine*, in the papers. Min wanted to use her fame to promote education for women and children in China, but the head of the Cultural Bureau held a meeting. He banned Min's name from the media, which basically killed her campaign.



Anchee Min

Biography continued

Min resides in Los Angeles County with her daughter Lauryann and her husband, Llyod Lofthouse. In addition to being a creative writer, she is also a painter, musician, and photographer. She writes and gives speeches in order to make a living. The book cover designs for each of her books are photos taken by Min. Her works to date include *Red Azalea* (1994), her memoir; *Katherine* (1995), a fictional story about an American ESL teacher in China; *Becoming Madame Mao* (2000), a historical fiction on Jiang Ching's life that exposes the humanity of the "white-boned demon" and her fall to evil; and *Wild Ginger* (2002), a tragic love story set in Shanghai during the Cultural Revolution. She is currently working on the publication of her fifth book, *Empress Orchid - The Life of China's Last Imperial Ruler* (Houghton Mifflin 2003).

In an interview with Annie Wang, when asked about what she will do in the future, Min responded, "I don't know about the future, maybe teach creative writing."

Selected Bibliography

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